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SUBJECT: WAR CRIMES TRIAL AGAINST FARDC TROOPS BEGINS IN
ITURI

REF: KINSHASA 1797

¶1. (U) The trial of 14 FARDC soldiers implicated in the deaths of civilians found in mass graves began December 27 in Bunia, Ituri. The mass graves, containing the remains of 32 men, women, and children missing since August, were discovered at a FARDC camp in Bavi November 22 (reftel). The accused have been charged with war crimes by a military tribunal and face life imprisonment.

¶2. (U) According to MONUC, 14 soldiers from the First Integrated Brigade's Intervention Battalion were charged, including four captains, a sub-lieutenant, and a corporal. Four of the suspects, including an engineering officer and a deputy intelligence officer of the battalion, escaped and will be tried in absentia. The Deputy Commander of the battalion, Captain Gedeon, maintains his innocence regarding both the killings and the movement of the bodies.

¶3. (U) The first hearing consisted of the identification of the accused and the designation of attorneys. The president of the five-member military tribunal hearing the case, Major Innocent Mayembe, said the proceedings will resume January 2. A verdict is expected by mid-February.

¶4. (U) Local and national human rights organizations, as well as many Bunia residents, attended the first hearing, according to media reports. MONUC Human Rights officers carried out a follow-up mission to Bavi on December 20.

¶5. (U) Comment: Although this is not the first time FARDC troops have been brought to trial for war crimes, it is much faster than the military justice system has responded in the past. The widespread publicity, indisputable evidence, and rapid arrest of the perpetrators undoubtedly contributed to the speed of the process. End comment.

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